

Inside and Outside: Nadine Gordimer and the Critics

ROWLAND SMITH

THE ESSAYS in this special issue were written on three continents: North America, Europe and Africa. The range of their concerns and the variety of their perspectives show the extent to which Nadine Gordimer is a world figure. Yet the same variation in treatment indicates the degree to which approaches to her work are conditioned by the cultural contexts in which the criticism itself is written.

Stephen Gray is the only South African scholar, writing within the country, to be represented in this volume, and his approach and tone are quite distinct from those of the other scholars and critics writing outside South Africa: in Canada, Europe and the United States. Not that there is uniformity among this larger group. The typically close analysis of text shown by the French critic, André Viola, is itself distinct from the primarily socially-based criticism of the North American scholars. And even here, the formal concerns of Mary Donaghy are significantly different from the feminist issues that Robin Visel raises in her analysis of the position of women in Gordimer's fiction. No; what distinguishes Stephen Gray's essay from others in this issue is the degree to which Gordimer's own pronouncements and values *matter* to him, even when he is discussing a novel first published in 1958.

The cultural and political issues dealt with in Gordimer's work involve a society in crisis, and that crisis has moral dimensions quite inconceivable to an outsider safely away from it all. Even the degree to which a white South African author can comment on the lives of the "non-white" majority is a topic debated with

some acrimony within South Africa, and the levels of moral one-upmanship that evolve from that debate stretch on to the crack of doom. Stephen Gray is not in any way acrimonious himself, nor does he attempt moral one-upmanship, but would an outsider use such edgy terms to describe the tonal faltering in the second novel by a writer who went on to write major, prize-winning works?

But Toby [in *A World of Strangers*] is also a conscienceless drifter; he can make no decisions other than in the end to quit, and he is guilty of moral dereliction (which, one fears, in those days passed all too easily as authentic existential angst).

Some of the judgments he makes we see with hindsight are unforgivable. The myth of the Nietzschean south, which Gordimer quite schematically transposes from Forster's Italy to her southern Africa, must finally be seen as unfortunate, even libellous. Italians are entitled to feel as offended as are South Africa's blacks that some old northern European dialectic of otherness renders them "opposites," "outsiders" — in short, excluded.

In comparison with this painful examination of what is entailed in Gordimer's early point of view, comment by outsider-critics appears particularly detached, even when it deals with social and political concerns. Richard Peck and Kelly Hewson discuss the success or failure in Gordimer's presentation of political values — and what her concept of fictional politics is — but neither of these North-American writers produces the tone created by phrases like "entitled to feel as offended," or words such as "libellous," "unforgivable." A passion for understanding what the compromises and concessions of South African writing entail is a feature peculiar to scholars in daily contact with the locales of Gordimer's fiction and the political in-fighting it both describes and itself creates. "Apparent classlessness for class-crippled Toby is a democratic wonder, maybe," writes Stephen Gray, "but Gordimer seems to endorse this romantic gush, rather than analyse it." After this recognition of "a deductive tendency . . . in her early work," he makes a strong claim for the "value" in *A World of Strangers*, but even that claim is introduced with a guarded "yet," and preceded by an explanation of the "grievous ideological and tactical faults" of the "old liberal style." The "new radical critics" are not to be overlooked:

Yet the new radical critics, guilt-stricken, can often not appear to be generous-spirited towards the old liberal style. At present its grievous ideological and tactical faults are anathema, its concealed paternalism and condescension out. Yet, confronted across the divide of forgetfulness with *A World of Strangers* once again, I believe it has taken on a newly promising value for us. It is one of the few works to tell us how things in Johannesburg really *were*.

What is fascinating about Stephen Gray's essay is not just the degree to which ideological and tactical faults insistently claim recognition, but also his insider's view of how different today's Johannesburg is from the setting of Gordimer's second novel. That double insight into the reality of the milieu in which Gordimer writes can only be offered by an insider, and the other essays in this collection, relying as they do on conventional academic approaches, gain resonance by the context provided by such an insider's echo-chamber. Not only is their detachment more marked, but also their freedom to comment as they will — without the moral scrutiny enforced on a participant — is strikingly evident.

The difference between the approach of the insider (involving history, politics, cultural theory) and the outsider's "literary" analysis is manifest in the two recent books about Nadine Gordimer.¹ And, unlike the essays in this journal, one is clearly superior. Stephen Clingman relates all Gordimer's novels to South African history at the time of their composition and also — through that history — to the cultural and political preoccupations that inform them. John Cooke uses the texts themselves and utterances by Nadine Gordimer in non-fictional pieces to present a series of arguments about her writing and its development. While his individual judgements are frequently illuminating, his general argument is often unconvincing. The whole book amounts to less than the sum of its parts. Clingman's political history and history of ideas, on the other hand, produce a cumulative picture of the contexts and issues that shape Gordimer's cultural milieu and that her writing itself has helped to mould. Clingman does discuss the texts as "literature," and uses current critical theory to illuminate them; the understanding that his book provides is far more convincing than can be suggested by any summary of its parts.

The correctness of Clingman's approach is inseparable from the content and context of Gordimer's fiction. As he explains:

Elsewhere, thought-provoking interpretations suffer from inadequate knowledge of the facts of Gordimer's situation and their intricacies and nuances. Gordimer's work could not have been written "anywhere," and while there are many ways of approaching her fiction, these will never be complete unless its close relationship to South African history is taken into account. (18)

It is that elusive combination of nuances and intricacies in Gordimer's situation that Cooke oversimplifies and distorts. One of his major claims is that Gordimer "identifies" with African culture in all her novels written after *The Late Bourgeois World*. This thesis, together with his outsider's focus, leads him to misstatements that Clingman conspicuously avoids. Here is Cooke on the change in Gordimer's allegiances:

It was not until a decade later [after 1962] that Gordimer would find the answer by ceasing to seek a connection between those two separate societies, but rather by identifying with a resurgent African culture. As reviewers of *July's People* noted, Gordimer still steps back to comment on her society in the later novel, but this impulse is easily balanced by her identification with the African culture she has claimed as her own. (38)

This is blurred rather than plain wrong. Gordimer frequently talks about the African nature of her sensibility and culture, but that is a far cry from identifying herself with black culture. To think that her fiction (from *A Guest of Honour* on) sees her "identifying" or "claiming as her own" an "African" culture, and meaning by that a black culture, is to miss the point of her insistent later motif that whites must allow blacks to speak for themselves. The denouement in *July's People* occurs when July refuses to speak Maureen's language, and for the first time she understands "everything." Part of the topicality in *Burger's Daughter* involves Rosa's wrestling with the issue of black-consciousness rejection of white *bona fides*: a point brilliantly illustrated and documented in Clingman's study of the South African political mood in the late seventies. It is true that in her later works Gordimer consistently identifies herself with the *struggle* for black liberation in a South African society where blacks will rule them-

selves, but this is not the same thing as identifying herself with that culture.

Clingman's final chapter is one of his best, and in it he addresses the problem of Gordimer's audience. Earlier he has argued that the novels written before *July's People* "deal with the question of culture, but they tend to do so in a large and abstract kind of way, and generally treat it as a question of *absence*; in depicting the alienation of European culture in Africa, its social and environmental identity is indicated essentially as a lack" (196). But, Clingman goes on to say in that last chapter, in Gordimer's later work there is also an "address to the black world and to the future." It is in the future that she sees the significance of present action: "The address of Gordimer's work to the black world is at some level a writing *in favour* of that world, for this domain then becomes the arbiter of significance, value and action on Gordimer's side of the social dividing line. Simultaneously the future becomes the arbiter of meaning and action in the present" (214-15). To Clingman, Gordimer is still firmly based on *her* side of the social dividing line, whatever the degree to which she favours an absent black world and black future. This is much more subtle and sophisticated an argument than Cooke's gross oversimplification that Gordimer claims African culture as her own. In Clingman's thesis the cultural *absence* that informs Gordimer's earlier fiction about colonial white society becomes an absent audience in her later work:

... it seems to be an "absent" world, considered both socially and temporally, that underlies the response of Gordimer's consciousness of history. The oppressed black world and the absent future together pose a "deep historic question" to which each novel is an attempted solution. Each attempts to answer the question of where it stands in relation to the oppressed and "absent" world. (215)

This commitment to an absent future — far from making Gordimer's position a fulfilling "identification" with black culture — goes hand in hand with her being "increasingly divided" from the black world:

... the picture arising from Gordimer's novels is one of inverse proportion on two fronts. The narrower her access to an oppressed

black world — in terms of the underlying assumptions that might identify her in any simple fashion with that world — the more radical is her response to its implicit demands. And the less accommodating and simple the prospect of the future becomes, the more insistent is Gordimer's address towards its ultimate resolution. (216)

As writing like this shows, Clingman's book is profoundly serious, and offers no simple "solutions." Cooke's discussion of a similar issue reveals the difference in calibre between the two studies:

With the failure of black and white to connect, Gordimer, increasingly through *The Late Bourgeois World*, removed herself from her situation, using formal ordering devices to give her world shape in the absence of a vision. She became, in fact, very much what her severest critics perceived her to be: a disaffected lady overlooking Johannesburg from the Olympian detachment of her Parktown home. She came down into her world in the late sixties after fashioning an "African-centred consciousness" which allowed her to "fit in." If this provided her with a sense of history, which has been so lacking in South African literature, it was a different kind than her Forsterian construct. (43)

There are good moments in Cooke's book. He is particularly sharp on the way landscape is used in *A Guest of Honour* (here his argument balances that of Mary Donaghy in this issue), and he makes useful comments on the recurring motif of mothers' selfishness towards their children in many of the novels. In each case, however, these localized successes are part of an overstated general argument: "with *A Guest of Honour* the vital centre of Gordimer's work becomes the veld" (11); and "the liberation of children from unusually possessive mothers" (10) is Gordimer's "major" private theme.

There are "many ways of approaching" Gordimer's fiction, and Clingman's close analysis of its relation to South African political and intellectual history is one of the most rewarding approaches to have appeared. All the essays in this special number have been written since his book was published, and all benefit from being able to take much of his groundwork for granted. Neither Clingman nor Cooke discusses *A Sport of Nature*, and the appearance of that new novel adds a further dimension to Gordimer studies

explored in this issue. Above all, the contributors to this collection show in their range of critical attitudes a variety of intellectual and cultural backgrounds that, I hope, gives the volume an undogmatic catholicity.

NOTE

- ¹ John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP), 1985. Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Allen), 1986.